

Re-membering exclusions: Participatory action research in public institutions

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Abstract

At a political moment when democracy, dissent and participation are under siege, especially in low income communities of color, we write this article to reveal how participatory action research (PAR) can be joined with a larger democratic project to re-member institutions and communities exiled today in neo-liberal society. This article draws on two large scale participatory action research studies conducted in a women's maximum security prison and in a series of racially desegregated public high schools to explore the power, strategic moves and difficulties of participatory action research within public institutions. Arguing that PAR offers a theory of method for democratic research, we enter two participatory research collaboratives: a four year, qualitative and quantitative study of the impact of college in prison on the women students, the prison environment, prisoners' post release outcomes and civil society, and an ongoing qualitative and quantitative study of how race, ethnicity, class, and academic opportunities and outcomes are (inequitably) distributed in public schools.

“The discourses of American democracy, individualism and liberty require the active misremembering of exclusions --psychic amnesia-- which returns as a repressed haunting.” Eng and Han, 2002, 347.

As the global empire (Hardt and Negri, 2003) realigns within and beyond the U.S., we confront the question of method. To what extent are social science methods theoretically and politically “of use” within/against neo-liberal consolidation? And for those of us committed to social justice studies, how do these global and local shifts in power affect how we design and engage our work? In this essay, we take up the practice of Participatory Action Research (Fals-Borda, 1979; Fine et. al. 2003; Freire, 1982; Torre et al, 2001) as a methodological strategy that can reveal the complex workings of power within institutions and re-member the bodies of social and political exclusion (Eng and Han, 2002; see also Opatow, 2002). We write this essay as an open letter to researchers committed to inquiry within public institutions; those who still believe that these institutions, while perhaps hijacked at the moment, represent contested sites that must be reclaimed as democratic public spaces for all.

In participatory action research (PAR) within public institutions, the very men, women and youth of poverty and/or color who have too often paid the greatest price within the neo-liberal State have the opportunity to critically reframe the large and local questions of social justice. As a collective of researchers, including historically marginalized and privileged collaborators, PAR projects aim to reveal the complex fissures and inequities in systems that represent themselves as rational, just and coherent while at the same time burying the exclusions and suffocating the ghosts. Locally and globally, PAR pricks what Eng and Han call “psychic

amnesia,” offering us a method for critical work within communities and institutions, revealing the fractures of power and restoring images of “what could be.”

In this essay we explore questions of epistemology and method burrowed within two PAR projects in public institutions: a series of racially integrated suburban public schools and a women’s maximum-security prison. Both institutions are woven tightly into the fabric of America’s exclusions. Racially integrated schools are, ideologically, the site onto which America’s fantasy of racial justice is projected, but on the ground, these schools walk a precarious line between racial/ethnic/class access and resegregation within (Orfield, 2003). Prisons, far more explicitly, are the spaces to which the excluded are sent in America, over 2,000,000 strong, exiled to invisibility. In each of these two projects we were invited to investigate a particular institutional concern about educational justice: Why does the “achievement gap” persist in racially integrated high schools? and What are the effects of college in prison? In each context we created only one condition of engagement: a participatory research team of youth and prisoners, respectively, who would be ‘trained’ in research methods, and then participate fully as partners in conceptualizing the questions to be asked, the theories to be developed, the ‘variables’ to be examined, the methods to be engaged, the interpretations to be crafted, and the products to be produced.

By drawing on these two projects, we do not mean to equate prisons and schools. Prisons are explicitly about State control; schools are much more complex settings of social reproduction and radical possibility (Weis and Fine, 2003). However, both are under State pressure to serve State interests, dependent on State dollars, and in the grip of a “control society” in which

ideologies of safety and justice are undermined by practices of surveillance and outcomes of inequity (Deleuze, 1990; Cole, 2000). Both prisoners and students of color have been inscribed, in both the national imagination and scholarly literatures, as lacking, deficient, disposable and barely worth public investment. In both projects our research would contend with politics, ideologies and an already churning discursive pot of (mis)representations (Farr and Moscovici, 1984). We recognize the paradoxes of participatory research when power is always present in the socio-political theatre of the public sector, within institutional arrangements (Powell, 1996) and within the praxis of social research (Foucault, 1977). We nevertheless consider social research to be a tool of democratic engagement in ongoing struggles for social justice (Martin-Baro, 1994).

March 1996 – December 2001: Sitting around a table in the Learning Center in New York State’s maximum-security prison for women, with tea, coffee, papers, carried-in black backpacks stuffed with data and prison bags (clear plastic for “security reasons”), lavender scarves and green uniforms, eyes watching, clocks ticking, stolen hugs. It’s 11 o’clock.

We were the research team, meeting every other week for four years, seven prisoners, three graduate students from the Graduate Center, one from Harvard, and Michelle (see Fine, Torre, Boudin, Bowen, Hylton, Martinez, Missy, Rivera, Roberts, Smart, Upegui, 2003). Our research team was a space for critical inquiry where we walked past barbed wire fences, through our racialized and classed histories, between biographies filled with too much violence and too little hope, and biographies lined with too much privilege

and too little critique. We were, at once, a team of semi-fictional coherence, and, on the ground, a group of women living very different lives, defined in part by class, race and ethnic differences. Half of us could go home at night; half of us were 'home.' Many of us brought personal histories of violence against women to our work, while all of us worried about violence against, and sometimes by, women. Some of us had long-standing experience in social movements for social justice; others barely survived on the outside. Some of us were White, Jewish, Latina, Caribbean and African American, some mixed. Most of us were from the mainland of this country, a few born outside the borders of the U.S. The most obvious divide among us was free or imprisoned, but the other tattoos and scars on our souls weave through our work, worries, writings and our many communities. Usually these differences enriched us. Sometimes they distinguished us. At moments they separated us. We understood ourselves to carry knowledge and consciousness determined, at once, by where we come from, and shaped by who we choose to be, alone, and then twice a month, together (Harding, 1983; Hartsock, 1983; Smith, 1987).

March 2002. We work with a set of school districts from 11 inner-ring integrated suburbs in the New York metropolitan area, as well as two urban districts. The full group of youth researchers have, thus far, met for two "youth research camp" retreats where they have become familiar with both the quantitative and qualitative features of the research. The first youth research camp of 36 high school students and 12 'first generation' college students, from across racial, ethnic and class lines, from special education to AP, from the wealthy suburbs to inner city, came together to design a survey that wouldn't look like a test; a survey to be distributed to 7000 youth in 13 school districts

in NJ and NY They insist that the survey include cartoons, open ended questions, their photos, names (as designers!) and that no question leaves respondents feeling like a failure...

At the camps, students in “special education” and students in “advanced placement” work alongside students from schools that refuse to label students. All import distinct, compelling and significant perspectives to the questions of class, race, ethnicity and opportunity in public education. The research is designed to answer four questions: How do students, across racial, ethnic, class and academic levels, view their opportunities, motives and the “achievement gap” in schools and in the nation? Where do youth perceive issues of racial, educational and social (in)justice in school and community? How well prepared are students across racial, ethnic groups and academic track for college post-graduation? What are the sites of racial, ethnic and class based possibility – where are the spots for educational justice and opportunity in school and community?

And now, in this essay, we query aloud about undertaking theoretically rich, politically provocative, critical PAR for justice within public institutions; collectively crafted research designed toward democratic inquiry and progressive policy change (see Cochran-Smith and Lytle for parallel discussion of participatory work in schools, 1993). We track questions we have confronted on how to best design and undertake critical participatory action research, in institutions, with co-researchers who sit in some of the most vulnerable seats in the nation. Shedding the discursive cloak of institutional coherence and justice, PAR reveals the fractures, hypocrisies and inequities that constitute the public institutions of contemporary American life

and, at the same time, helps us imagine radical possibilities for “what could be.”

Moves of Theory and Method in Participatory Research

In both the prison and the schools, we have designed for a theoretical and methodological glide between wide-angle analyses of socio-political structures and deep, up-close analyses of lives and relations (see Alford, 1998; Fine & Weis, 2000; Hitchcock, 1999). By committing to participatory methods, we recognize from the start that knowledge is located, produced, silenced and amplified in varied sites within an institution; that the dominant story told about institutional life is but one story and typically told from the “top,” and that critical understandings of power and inequity, while usually buried, are essential to the democratic resuscitation of public institutions.

We undertake PAR to unravel the ideological weave and material conditions that produce a sense of coherence in these institutions and naturalize resultant inequalities. We seek to document how privilege and disadvantage constitute public institutions; we assess how inequalities grow embodied and legitimated within the bodies of corrections officers, school boards, educators, communities, students, prisoners, and those of us who witness. And we stretch to find those spaces in which the magic of social possibility and resistance survives (Fine and Weis, 2003). We write on key strategic moments of design, theory, method and ethics in PAR, as we aspire toward research of meaning in very hard times.

Designing for democratic participation

Historically, PAR developed out of the rich soil of critical, community knowledges held by “insiders” to community life. As those insiders sat at the bottom of social arrangements, they

witnessed the holes in the ideological stories told, the practices engaged, and the contradictions that sustain stratification (Deutsch, 1974; DuBois, 1935; Fals-Borda, 1979; Freiere, 1982; Greene, 1995; Collins, 1991; Hurtado, 1996; Lewin, 1951; Martin-Baro, 1994; Smith, 1999). We take seriously such insider knowledge which then forces us to trouble traditional notions of ‘whose knowledge counts.’ In the prison and the schools, we brought a commitment to create participatory research collectives in what Gloria Anzaldua would call *borderlands*: “Borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish us from them...A borderland is a vague undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition. The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants.” (Anzaldua, 1987, 3). Drawing as well from Mary Louise Pratt’s (1991) writings on “contact zones,” we sought: “social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of power...” (Pratt, 1992, p. 4). Framing the space of our research as a contact zone pushed us towards a more textured understanding of human interaction across power differences, extending our collective theorizing beyond simplified binaries such as insider/outsider, oppressor/oppressed, to examine the activity of the space between, of Anzaldua’s borderlands. A ‘contact perspective’ highlights the interactive and improvisational elements of encounters across power differences, emphasizing how “subjects are constituted in and by their relations to each other...in terms of copresence, interaction, [and] interlocking understandings and practices” (Pratt, 1992, p. 5). Further, in theorizing our PAR collectives as contact zones, we recognize the co-construction not only of subjects but of knowledge and research, which forces us to explicitly address power relationships and analyze places of disjuncture within our team. This analysis holds the potential to reveal the radical possibilities of PAR for social imagination and critical knowledge production, as these sites often provide new

understandings that each of us, as situated individuals (insiders, outsiders), would not likely come to on our own (Torre, forthcoming).

We therefore worked to create research collectives of very differently-positioned researchers in both the prison and the schools (the Critical Gap Project), creating a montage of insiders and outsiders to institutional life. As political theorist Nancy Fraser (1990) would argue, we believe it is disingenuous to invite co-researchers to the table without equipping them (and us) with shared skills, knowledge and language for full participation. By recognizing the divisions and inequities wrought by social stratification, we carved out spaces to create an 'us' struggling against the tides of separation and essentialism, and built research teams drenched in the theory and methods of PAR and critical theory.

In the Critical Gap project, our initial task was to build a diverse community of high school researchers from urban and suburban communities, traversing zip codes, housing stock, racial and ethnic boxes, languages, families, sexualities, Advanced Placement and special education, athletes, students with disabilities, boys and girls. At the first research camp, a two day overnight at St. Peter's College in Jersey City, youth participated in 'methods training,' learning the nuances of interview, focus group and survey design. To begin, we had to deconstruct what a "researcher" looks like. Sati, a youth researcher from the South Bronx, sketched, and then disrobed, the balding white guy "scientist":



In the prison, the building of a research collective involved the delicate knitting together of insiders and outsiders – graduate and undergraduate students interested in social (in)justice. Some in prison, some free. Together we circled, addressed, avoided and confronted with outrage, tears and theory, the enormous inequities with respect to power and freedom that sat around our table; that saturated our biographies; that threatened to predict our futures (see Torre, et al., 2001). The dynamics of power, participation and humiliation in prison are raw, shocking and sometimes horrifying. Our research collective was by no means immune. Judy Clark, one of the prisoner-researchers, reflects on our PAR process (see Fine, et. al, 2003):

“One of the values of qualitative research is to challenge the traditional power relation between those who do the research and the object of the research, through a participatory process. But the realities and dynamics of prison, as the social context of this project, also affects the quality of work and the participation of the prisoner researchers in stated and unstated ways. As prisoners, we are always bounded by roles and rules of a closed institution. Some argue that we are in prison to be punished; others would argue, to be corrected. But in any case, we are essentially objects who must be controlled. On the other hand, we are striving to take responsibility for our lives, to become active,

responsible subjects. This conflict of roles and expectations plays itself out in our roles as researchers in this project.”

It was through such diverse and divergent experiences and standpoints that our research questions, methods, analyses and “products” were shaped, influenced, and invented. We purposely created research collectives where varied perspectives could be aired, challenged, and thoughtfully discussed—without the imposition of ‘making nice’ or reaching unanimous agreement. When tensions emerged among the team, rather than ignoring or silencing them through consensus, we sought meaning in the friction. For instance, we analyzed the way our local tensions mirrored larger political dynamics of the institution. This doubled research practice calls for both micro and macro levels of analysis as it explicitly recognizes power relationships and situates the work in a social historical context.

Critical Theorizing: Re-framing the “question”

As PAR moves forward, the first collective task involves the explicit reappraisal of the given question – in this case, “What causes the achievement gap?” and “Is college in prison a worthwhile social investment?” At the catalytic intersection of insider and outsider knowledges grows a critical re-framing of the presenting question. By definition, PAR designs re-view the “problem” with an eye toward complexity, politics, social psychology and structure and away from simple victim-blaming explanations. By troubling dominant conceptions, PAR insists that researchers historicize, contextualize and fracture the “common sense” story.

To illustrate: In the prison study, the question we were invited to investigate asked, simply, what are the costs and benefits to society of college in prison? Without the benefit of

history, we would not have known that in 1994 there were 350 college-in-prison programs and in 1995 that number dropped to eight. In 1994, federal Pell grants were still available to all persons in the U.S. But in 1995, President Clinton signed the Violent Crime Acts, which disallowed the use of Pell grants (federal dollars) for prisoners. With a national mood of ‘get tough on crime,’ punishment replaced rehabilitation as the explicit purpose of prison. The women in prison lived this history. They could narrate the shift in national opinion and prison policy as sophisticated archivists of carceral history.

Together we muddled through layers of history and politics in order to broadly theorize the impact of college in prison on the women, their children, their post-release outcomes, crime levels, the prison environment, the economy and the ‘tax burden’. We learned that funding for public education and for prisons have been inversely correlated in New York State; and just as dollars moved out of schools and into prisons, so too did young bodies of poverty and color move out of buildings with books into buildings with bars. We studied together the racial politics of who is arrested, who enjoys “alternative sentencing,” who ends up in prison, who has access to quality secondary or higher education in and out of prison; and the extent to which state dollars flow to support prisons over higher education (see Gangi, Schiraldi and Zeidenberg, 1998). We had to grapple with the fact that men of color are more likely to be in prison in New York State than in the State University system; that ‘downstate’s crime is upstate’s economy’; that most prisoners in New York State come from seven or eight communities in New York City, have extraordinarily low literacy rates, are disproportionately under educated, are African American and Latino; the fact that New York State now spends more on prisons than on college; that women are the fastest growing prison population; that federal financial assistance for college

is shifting nationally from “need” to “merit” (Gangi, et. al. 1998).

We could have plucked our research out of history and asked a narrow, psychological question, like how is the self-esteem or personal efficacy of individual women affected by college classes in prison? And we would likely have produced positive results. But with a PAR design we were obligated (and honored) to join the policy debate and political struggle of prisoners’ rights—in this case the debate and struggle around the survival and restoration of college in prison. A “simple” and neat research design addressing the psychological impact on individuals involved in college would, by omission of the larger context, trivialize the socio-political relations that have saturated the growth of the prison-industrial-complex and shriveled the rehabilitative possibilities within prisons. We would have erased the historic offering and then withholding of Pell grants. We would have obfuscated the tragic state of public schooling in poor neighborhoods that produces, in part, the substantial prison population. *A tight and narrow opening for inquiry gives vast license for institutional mis-rememberings of exclusions.* Hard questions are exiled to the terrain of the unstudyable, fading from social consciousness. PAR, in contrast, is situated in local and national struggles and matures in long, difficult conversations among and between insiders and outsiders. Participatory action researchers design their work to provoke, theoretically and politically, a strategic widening of the analytic lens of social research.

Surfacing counter stories

As PAR widens the lens of analysis, it also surfaces a series of counter stories or social explanations that challenge dominant laminations of social arrangements. Insiders, particularly those who have watched an institution operate from the ‘bottom,’ know all too well the stories

told about why the institution works for society and why *they* are failing. They know all too well how the institution insures its success (and their failure). Engaged outsiders can join the task by asking the naïve questions about “what is” and importing critical perspectives about “what could be.” Engaged outsiders [insiders?] can speak and get a hearing for counter stories. At the webbed intersections of PAR work, contestations of the dominant story, what might be called counter stories (Harris, Carney and Fine, 2001) frame the design and levitate in the analysis.

To illustrate: In the Critical Gap project, we examined the “achievement gap” initially as a problem of “race,” ethnicity or class. The dominant explanation holds that students’ race, ethnicity and class predict academic engagement, motivation, connection to school, preparedness for college. With an N of 3799 quantitative responses to the survey items about engagement, motivation and achievement and narrative qualitative responses to questions such as, “What was the most powerful thing a teacher ever said to you, positive or negative,” or “Describe your best (worst) possible school experience,” we were able to determine that for every item studied, race/ethnicity/class, indeed, predicted well and consistently.

To widen the analytic lens, however, and decenter this dominant explanation, we asked students to help us explain the observed race/ethnicity/class differences. They escorted us to an alternative explanation: tracking in suburban high schools. We extended the analysis, then, to examine how “track” affects student outcomes. Tracking or leveling designates those well-established and hard to undo structural practices by which schools organize students’ access to rigor. Students in the top track report significantly higher levels of access to rigor, qualified educators, rich curriculum and a smoother route to college entrance. And in these “integrated

districts,” 50 years after *Brown v. Board of Education*, over 60% of White and Asian American students in these schools are in the top tracks while less than 40% of African Americans, Latinos and Afro-Caribbeans are. These discrepancies hold even for students with college educated parents (Mickelson, 2002; Orfield, 2002). We found that academic track predicts all of these quantitative and qualitative outcomes, better than race/ethnicity. In multiple regression and discursive analyses, track was a stronger predictor of academic engagement, motivation, aspirations for college and sense of personal agency than race/ethnicity (Oakes, et. al. 1997; Wells and Serna, 1996).

Within and across segregated and desegregated schools, race and ethnicity covary systematically with access to academic rigor. In fact, both within and across public schools – due to inequitable financing, the uneven distribution of teacher quality, persistent segregation and tracking within desegregated schools -- African American and Latino students have the least access to quality educators, state funding and academic rigor. Students across groups acknowledge these disparities, and they despair. At our second research camp, Emily, a biracial youth researcher, drew a portrait of “what it feels like to be the only, or one of the few Black kids in an honors class.” She entitled the sketch ‘Hunting Bison’:



Insiders like Emily know well the systematic co-variation of race, ethnicity and track. They witness how structural covariates are grafted onto demographics: how they are built, justified, internalized and secured. And so it is the explicit decoupling of covariates that critical participatory research must undertake. Had we not investigated questions of tracking (and other structures of stratification within and across schools) we too would have produced data that confirm a “gap” predicated largely on race/ethnicity “differences.” PAR projects must be designed strategically to decouple covariates; to challenge inequities represented as “natural.” Toward this end, when we analyze youth experiences in school, we produce analyses by race/ethnicity, by track placement and by parental educational status. We were distressed to see that even for those youth with college educated parents, race/ethnicity still over-determined track placement. Indeed, if, as we have found, almost 74% of Asian-American students, 65% of White students, and 43% of African American students and 35% of Latino students with college educated parents are placed in top tracks, one might argue that the very desegregated schools

designed to narrow the gap are actually contributing to a downward mobility of middle income African American and Latino families.

The academic ‘achievement gap’ is over-predicted. The confounding of race, ethnicity, class and low opportunities/low resources is a political and moral problem for civic society and a significant and under-acknowledged threat to the validity of social research on “race,” ethnicity and academic achievement. PAR kept us from naively replicating – and confirming – the dominant explanation.

Revealing the production of privilege

PAR designs are not only dedicated to revealing the gross effects of institutional inequity on those deprived; they can also reveal how institutions produce and protect privilege. Inside researchers know where to find pockets of exclusion and how to “out” the institutional secrets about power and privilege (Mills, 1959; Scott, 1990). In our work in schools, we were particularly interested in how class (middle and upper) and race (White) privilege consistently transform into “merit” (Burns, forthcoming). So we asked the students. We ran focus groups and conducted individual interviews with varied samples of students, including those students who were considered “high achievers” (predominantly White and middle/upper middle class). We asked these students to talk to us about how their teachers and families support their academic success.

The youth were quite forthcoming in enumerating the tutors, Occupational Therapy, psychotherapy, Physical Therapy, PSAT prep/ SAT prep, chemistry tutors, Ritalin, learning disabilities that would permit extended time on standardized tests, writing camps, letters of

recommendations from family friends, using “legacy” (referred to by some students as “White people’s Affirmative Action”) to get into college, having mothers write/edit essays or bibliographies, parents who called Guidance Counselors to make sure they were placed in the “top classes”.... The students revealed that they enjoy these supports individually, quietly, confidentially and consistently throughout their class fraction. They reminded us that these supports were purchased using private dollars, secured using private connections, and acquired and maintained secretly (Newmann, 1990; Ogbu, 1990; Oxley, 1990; Pittman, 201). Some of the more privileged students on the research team alerted us to this reservoir of evidence on *academic steroids* that elite families pump into their children so they appear meritorious (Burns, forthcoming).

By revealing how privatized supports convert private privilege into public merit, the PAR youth researchers were able to reframe what appears to be a race/ethnicity “deficit” as largely a question of covertly-sustained privilege and institutional collusion. With insiders, we were able to document the increasing *privatization of development*. As a collective of insiders and outsiders, we have been able to work productively with schools and school districts to help them offer comparable supports to poor and working class students who are wholly dependent on, and trusting of, the public sphere for access to college.

Methodologically and ethically, we came to the realization that it is essential to study not only those who are “disadvantaged” but the full stratified formation within which “privilege” is acquired and protected. Indeed, we know now that it is most important to pierce the opaque walls of “privacy” for behind those walls lie the keys to how institutions seamlessly benefit those in

power (see also Billig, 1995; Burns, forthcoming; Fine and Burns, 2003; Fine, Powell, Weis, Wong, 1998). This is, perhaps, the most theoretically and politically generative as well as potentially threatening aspect of PAR.

A menu of designs....

We sketch below a series of possible design frameworks that may be useful to consider in participatory work on social (in)justice (see Bhabha, 1990; Farmer, 1992; Twine, 2000; Winant, 2003). Please note that these frameworks can be used with qualitative and/or quantitative methods and data. They share, at base, a commitment to reframing questions of theory, policy and politics from within sites of contestation:

- *Full compositional analyses:* PAR designs pull for multiple perspectives within the same institution, organized through an analysis of questions of power. Such designs enable a mapping of the full community (see Fine and Weis, 1998) or institution (as in the schools) to document the aggregate view and the ideological representation of the whole. Full compositional analyses allow us to view the site through a lens of coherence and integrity. Though these full analyses often reproduce dominant representations, they nevertheless allow readers to grasp the familiar frame before the research ventures into more fractured analyses. Then...
- *First fracturing analyses:* Participatory researchers can identify the first fracturing analysis to produce an interior analysis of the institution/community through lines of ‘difference’ and power. These analyses destabilize the representation of institutional

coherence, integrity and stability; activating, typically, the first challenge to “well established facts” (Law and Mol, 2003). Drawing on the schools project, this involves disaggregating full-school data by race/ethnicity and class; or mapping who is in prison and who enjoys alternatives to sentencing (Poe and Yagamata, 2000). Then...

- *Contrastive/counter analyses:* While the first fracturing analysis interrupts representations of coherence, this call for counter analyses presses the move to destabilize further. That is, in these analyses, we juxtapose the principle fracture lines with other lines of challenging analysis. In the prison study, we offer up perspectives from college students, dropouts and corrections officers to yield not only the ways in which they corroborate each other, but the spaces in which their analyses dynamically challenge each other. By placing these varied analyses adjacent to each other, we reveal the many competing stories that can be told about and within institutional life and power (see Bowen and Bok, 1998 for excellent example; Lather, 1991). Ironically, these comparative analyses reveal where fault lines can be found, where mobilization can begin and where radical change is possible. And/or...
- *Local excavation:* To determine the angles for contrastive or counter analyses, we have undertaken a series of analyses that look for local complexity or what John Law (2003) calls “fluid spatiality.” We have, in our work, identified a set of institutional corners or buried, dusty and marginal spots in which the institutional pulse has a resistant, rebellious or distinctive tempo (Guishard, forthcoming; Roberts, forthcoming), e.g. college in prison. The methods for levitating these spots may include:

*** outlier analyses:* seeking the outliers, the strange, prohibited and transgressive “cases” to understand how margins are created and defined in the institution; to reveal how outliers actually represent the institution/community in exposing the tainted soul which must be purged (Payne, forthcoming).

*** analyses of privilege:* be sure to trouble who/what is advantaged, as well as who/what is considered disadvantage, and theorize the relations between lives of privilege and institutional self-preservation (see Burns, forthcoming; Cookson and Persell, 1985).

*** splintering analyses:* resist consensus as the driving force behind analysis and seek occasions to reveal dissensus, that is, varied perspectives on the same “finding” (Torre, forthcoming).

- *Policy-in-practice analyses:* This design strategy seeks to trace how obviously related, and seemingly remote social policies shape local contexts, group identities and individual lives. It is easy to write up institutional stories as thick, local qualitative descriptions, without revealing the spider webs of power that connect institutional and individual lives to larger social formations. And yet to not draw these lines for readers renders them invisible and colludes in obfuscating the structural conditions that undergird social inequities. Thus, when we engage in policy-in-practice analyses we, for instance, assess the extent to which particular policies (e.g. educational finance inequities or zero tolerance or inequitable distribution of teacher quality) affect youth

outcomes.

In the prison study, we found ourselves tracing how policy changes in deinstitutionalization of persons with mental health problems, parole practices and urban housing gentrification have affected who is in prison, how long they stay and who returns. In the aftermath of deinstitutionalization, and the acute loss of affordable housing, the numbers of low-income urban men and women swelled within rapidly expanding prison walls. Parole was harder to attain, ‘tough on crime’ policies were passed and the prison economy and privatization flourished.

While causality remains to be determined, the linkages between who was deinstitutionalized and the rise (upwards of 50% of prisoners have mental health diagnoses) in mentally ill prisoners deserves attention. So, too, given that more than half of prisoners are released to homeless shelters, it comes as little surprise that approximately two thirds are reincarcerated within three years (Torre, et al, 2001). And all the while, private prison stocks continue to rise.

It seems clear that researchers, as public intellectuals, are among the few who might dare to visibilize the strings that attach political and moral conditions with individual lives. Rendering visible, like re-membering exclusions, is precisely the task of theory, and therefore must be taken up by method.

- *Revealing sites for possibility:* As part of our theoretical and ethical commitment, we

create designs that will document those spaces, relations, practices, subversive or explicit engagements in which possibility flourishes, democratic principles of justice whisper, or critique gets a hearing. Our commitment to revealing sites for possibility derives not only from a theoretical desire to re-view “what is” and “what could be” but also from an ethical belief that critical researchers have an obligation not simply to dislodge the dominant discourse but to help readers/audience imagine where the spaces for resistance, agency, and possibility lie. We craft research that aims toward Lather’s “catalytic validity”; research that aims to provoke thought and action.

Ethics of deep participation

“Is speaking the unspeakable possible?... Bearing official witness within a legitimate organization provides at least the assurance that there will be a witness to one’s witnessing; that one will encounter an ear with the duty to listen. But the question remains open as to whether telling and hearing are possible in everyday social encounters.” (Apfelbaum, 2002, 26)

Filled with pleasures and challenge, participatory work within institutions, with low-power voices in the majority, trembles with ethical questions and dangers easily avoided in more traditional, distanced epistemologies. Initially we -- those of us from the Graduate Center -- established basic ground rules for working together. But almost immediately the larger collective *we* accumulated a series of ethical principles written in pencil, necessary for our local work, including and extending well beyond the APA guidelines. We write in pencil as the negotiation of power and positionality is an active and ongoing practice among the team. Below we enumerate a set of these ethical moments that routinely occur within PAR.

We preface this section with an acknowledgement that PAR itself represents an ethical and epistemological stance that recognizes the power and knowledge of insiders; the strength of inside-outside collaborations; the generative power of difference and the urgency of critical work for democratic public institutions. While PAR will, undoubtedly, lift up ethical concerns typically detoured by more distanced methods, we would argue that much social research is, today, conducted on, despite and often against their knowledge and best interests, people who suffer most under current social arrangements. A new epistemological frame and set of commitments is needed for those of us concerned with the knotty relation of social science and social justice. PAR offers a flickering light for such work. Always riddled with the dialectics of power, the potential for cooptation and the likelihood of subversion, PAR nevertheless situates research at the heart of social struggle.

To begin with, a simple, yet profound, ethical bump we consistently face is the challenge posed by questions of confidentiality and anonymity within institution-based PAR. The task, of course, is not as straightforward as altering the names and the demographics, because everyone in an institution knows everyone else. When we suggested the use of pseudonyms for the women in prison, for instance, most of the women rejected this effort to assure confidentiality. Having been denied the right to represent themselves for too many years, most wanted to use their real names in our publications.

In contrast, within the schools, when we would interview youth in a focus group, there might be only one African American or Latino “high achiever” in the group. Whether or not s/he

changed her name, everyone would know who s/he was. Our ability to promise these students anonymity was undermined by the broad-based lack of students of color in the high achieving tracks. We could change the names so that no one outside the institution would know, but most within the institution knew the players well.

In addition to negotiating the ethics of *local visibility*, PAR designs within institutions must contend with *local vulnerabilities*. We try, always, to build in ways to anticipate varied responses to the work; to avoid the misinterpretation of empirical materials; to prevent the misuse of findings, and to counter any potential for the punishment of inside researchers for daring to speak truth to power. Researching critically from within, we therefore developed a finely tuned set of surveillance checks. In the prison, one prisoner per research session took on the role of the superintendent and the Department of Corrections, to anticipate their reactions to our work. This doesn't mean we designed toward conformity or away from contentious issues; it means we were ever vigilant, never insulated, thoroughly immersed in and ever resistant to, the authoritarian assertion of a single dominant voice. We were extremely conscientious about being in touch with administrators, beyond merely seeking permission. Prison administrators were and remain the gatekeepers to changes in policy and practice. PAR relies on co-researchers, many of whom are profound critics, a number of whom are most vulnerable. Those who dare to speak from within run an enormous risk of retribution. Therein lies the danger of *speaking*.

November 2002, just post release of the prison report: Phone call: "Michelle, all of the prisoners who were on the research team are being interrogated, their cells searched, their papers, writings and poetry taken. Some are being threatened with being sent to

another facility; others are being told they may go to SHU (the Solitary Housing Unit).
Can you help us figure out why they are being singled out?"

As with *speaking*, within participatory work across differences, we confront ethical questions of *witnessing*. In the schools, a methodological feature of the PAR youth researcher work includes participant-observations in each others' schools. In the Fall of 2002, a group of Lower East Side high school seniors, primarily poor and working class, educated at a very under-resourced small school in NYC, visited one of the more privileged schools in the research consortium. Well rehearsed in their "researcher identities," this group had chosen to focus on finance inequity in NY State. The two districts— in New York City and wealthy Westchester suburbs —receive approximately \$7,000 per child and over \$15,000, respectively.

As juniors they had traveled to several wealthy Westchester communities and documented differential access to computers, books, libraries, AP classes, etc. Faced with such obvious inequities they were disturbed that "there's like no minorities in those top classes." Seeing privilege up close, however, was not merely an academic exercise. All too familiar with racist representations of "them," on the visits they confronted what they couldn't know: the striking material and intellectual capital accumulated through privilege.

Sitting on green grass waiting for their train back to the city, students expressed amazement at the differences between their own school and the large suburban complex they had spent the day visiting. "Did you see the auditorium? Okay, our auditorium looks like...[crap] compared to that one"... "Because they have money, they could actually have a darkroom that

they can do photography in,” another exclaimed. Others focused on the library, “They have a lot of books!” “It’s like a regular library.” “The computers!” One student highlighted the difference in access to technology within the classroom and its effect on student learning: “I went to [a science class where] a girl gave a presentation about abortion. She had slides to show everyone [on a slide projector and a computer]...when we had that in our school we just did a poster.” Several, having also visited science classes, followed-up with remarks on the “real” science laboratories: the lab equipment, the sinks in the rooms, the materials for experiments.

Now seniors, this same group visited another Westchester high school. Now adrenalin-filled with the terror and excitement of their own college application processes, these young people toured the building with a sense of awe, depression and disgust. Nikaury mumbled, “This school *is* college.” Jose continued the conversation, “They already take psychology and advanced math and English.” Emily nailed it, “*We’re* going to compete with *these* students when we get to college?” A confrontation with profoundly unjust social arrangements provoked a psychological glide from outrage to shame; a rainbow of emotions spilled onto the sidewalks, and consumed the air on the train ride back home. We have had to build in processes before, during and after such visits so that students can document inequity without losing their souls, spirits or their sense of hope.

Finally, we comment upon another lurking danger of PAR about which we worry collectively: *publishing strong critiques of public institutions at a time when the public sphere is fundamentally under siege*. At the present historic moment, any public critique of public institutions runs the risk of being appropriated by the Right, furthering the deprivation of those

already oppressed by social arrangements. We worry about this in particular with respect to the integrated public schools, for too many are eager to shoplift critical research in an aggressive campaign against desegregation or racial justice in education. But prisoners' rights are equally under attack. And so we move forward with delicacy and commitments for a resuscitated, not stripped, public sphere.

But is it generalizable?

If, as we have argued, PAR yields multiple interpretations of social institutions, reveals broad-based contradictions and power-driven fissures in institutional life, and disrupts the ideology of consensus, then psychology's methodological commitments to inter-rater reliability, expert validity and generalizability are radically challenged. Indeed, PAR rejects traditional commitments to researcher distance, external expertise, consensus and scientific agreement (Harding, 1993 p. 69). With democratic (de)construction of context and method, participatory social research incites thick, moral questions for which there is no neutral territory. Conceptions of "expert validity" and inter-rater reliability are unsettled. *Who* can validate a construct? *Who* must agree – or who should be kept out of the room – in order for high levels of inter-rater reliability to be reached?

On the other hand, we would argue that with PAR, *construct validity* is vitally enhanced as sturdy, grounded local meanings are generated and negotiated in conversation between insiders and outsiders; and then confirmed empirically on the ground. So too *catalytic validity* (Lather, 1990) is strengthened by the deep, ongoing immersion of the research practice within local contexts and struggles.

Qualitative researchers have typically dodged questions about validity and generalizability, as if they were irrelevant to our work: too narrow; too positivist; too essentialist. Yet, committed to policy, practice, theory and politics, we are keenly interested in how our findings resonate in other sites. Thus, we offer the notion of *theoretical generalizability*: the extent to which specific, well-developed theoretical concepts, relations and patterns effectively migrate from one site of study to other social locations. When we speak throughout the U.S. about our research with schools, prisons and low income communities, we find audiences who resonate to the sense that poor and working-class youth are regarded as disposable; schools are recognized as sites for perverse reproduction and at the same time extraordinary resistance; sites of possibility are documented even within oppressive contexts like prisons. It is from the global head-nods and requests to co-publish in response to these analyses, from urban New York City to rural New Zealand, farms in Maine, death row in San Quentin prison, Aboriginal struggles in Australia, that we piece together the notion of theoretical generalizability (see Laws and Mol, 2003, on “transformative continuity”).

Urgency: An obligation to act

PAR takes theory, practice, politics and action seriously. The research community is diverse and, by definition, grounded in local politics. The investigation is rigorous. The analysis promises to be kaleidoscopic, oscillating and bold - a response to the misrememberings of exclusion, the psychic amnesia that haunts America. Counter explanations will percolate, and dominant discourses may stutter or at least share the dias with competing explanations (Clough, 2002; Hurtado, 2003). But PAR insists on action, in the form of policy, practice, organizational

change and/or social movements. Toward this end, we try to design research to reveal spots of possibility, extraordinary spaces where democratic practice could/does take place (Fine and Weis, 2003).

We end with urgency because that is where PAR begins. Rooted in the “soil of discontent” (Roberts, 2002), PAR projects are radical strategies generated in response to oppressive conditions of struggle (Fals-Borda, 1979). Having imported PAR into public institutional work, we are now humbled by the risks involved - not because the IRB didn’t approve the proper consent forms, but because public institutions will serve to reproduce existing class and race relations unless they are intentionally interrupted and realigned. As Beverly Tatum (1999) explains, racism is like the moving walkway in the airport. You don’t need to do a thing for it to keep rolling forward. To stop it, to interrupt, requires intentionality.

In the prison project, we have produced many reports and documents; met with legislators and representatives from the Governor’s office; solicited conservative and radical “endorsers”; created a website from which the full report could be downloaded; and published and distributed widely community organizing brochures, in English and Spanish, for our friends and allies in community based and advocacy organizations.

So, too, in the school-based work, we are preparing, with youth and educators, ways to present the material back to schools; and to create power points and graffiti museums filled with quotes from students about school racial/ethnic relations. Some youth are creating activist brochures on school financing, others on tracking. Together we will write articles for teen

magazines, scholarly journals, policy white papers, materials for educators, and produce, we hope, a theatre in the round: “Dear Brown Family: Youth Perspectives on Second Generation Integration.”

We don't believe, for a moment, that social injustice is a 'cognitive' problem, but we do believe that social research, in collaboration with social movements within and beyond public institutions, can prick the 'psychic amnesia' that has infected America (see Fine, Weis, Weseen and Wong, 1999).

Funding for these projects comes from: Leslie Glass Foundation, Open Society Institute, Rockefeller Foundation and Spencer Foundation. A preliminary version of this paper was presented at the Qualitative Inquiry Conference, University of Georgia, January 2003. We appreciate critical commentary from Susan Opatow, Martin Packer and many others.

Footnote 1: The 1980s and 1990s, in the United States, were decades of substantial public and political outcry about crime, and about criminals. During these years, stiffer penalties were enforced for crimes, prisons were built at unprecedented rates, parole was tougher to achieve, “three strikes and you’re out” bills were passed, and college was no longer publicly funded for women and men in prison. Indeed, with the signing of the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act, President Bill Clinton stopped the flow of all federal dollars, which had

enabled women and men in prison to attend college (Pell grants). It was then up to the states, simply, to finalize the closing of most prison based college programs around the nation. At Bedford Hills Correctional Facility, a vibrant college program had been coordinated by Mercy College for over 15 years. In 1995, this program, like over 340 others nationwide, was closed. This decision provoked a sea of disappointment, despair and outrage from the women at Bedford Hills who had been actively engaged in higher education and in GED/ABE preparation. And yet, within months, a group of inmates met with the Superintendent and, later, an active community volunteer, and soon they, with a consortium of colleges and universities, committed to reestablishing college within the prison.

The design of the college was conceptualized through pillars of strong, ongoing participation by the prison administration, staff, the inmates, faculty and volunteers. Students, in particular, are expected to “give back” in any number of ways. They teach, mentor, pay the equivalent of a month’s wages for tuition, give back while in prison and demonstrate high levels of community engagement once they are released (see Fine, Torre, Boudin, Bowen, Clark, Hylton, Martinez, “Missy,” Roberts, Smart, Upegui, 2001). These women have, for the most part, spent the better (or worst) part of their lives under the thumbs of poverty, racism and men: 80% carry scars of childhood sexual abuse, terrible educational biographies, tough family and community backgrounds, long lists of social and personal betrayals. For these women, growing back the capacity to join a community, engage with a community, give back, and trust are remarkable social and psychological accomplishments.

Thus, when Michelle was asked to conduct the empirical documentation of the impact of college on the women, the prison environment and the world outside the prison, it seemed all too

obvious that a participatory design behind bars would be nearly impossible—and essential. Committed to a Participatory Action Research Design, our research team combined Graduate Center researchers (Michelle Fine, PI, María Elena Torre, Project Director, Melissa Rivera, Rosemarie A. Roberts and Debora Upegui) and prison-based researchers (Kathy Boudin, Iris Bowen, Judith Clark, Aisha Elliot, Donna Hylton, Migdalia Martinez, “Missy,” and Pamela Smart). Conducted over the course of three years, the research design required a quantitative analysis to assess the extent to which college reduced reincarceration rates (conducted by the New York State Department of Correctional Services) and affected the tax burden imposed on citizens of New York State for prisons (conducted in part by Former Commissioner of Corrections Michael Jacobson) and a qualitative analysis to determine the psychosocial effects of college on the women, prison environment, their children and their post-release transitions (for full report see www.changingminds.ws or Torre, et. al., 2002).

The research was designed to answer four questions:

1. What are the personal and social effects of college in prison on students and their children?
2. What is the impact of the college experience on the safety and management of the prison environment?
3. What is the impact of the college experience on the transition home from prison?
4. What are the fiscal costs and benefits of *providing* college to women in prison, and what are the fiscal costs and benefits of *withholding* college from women in prison?

The methods include:

Archival analysis: review the records of the college program since inception (1997), tracking rates of persistence, women drafted (transferred to other prisons mid-sentence), drop out rates, racial

and ethnic distribution, percent in pre-college and college courses.

Inmate-initiated research on the impact of college, which consisted of one-on-one interviews of four to five women each by 15 inmates (N=65 interviews by 15 inmates).

Focus group interviews with women at BHCF, selected on the basis of the women's status in the program: drop out; ABE/GED student; pre-college students; first-time college students; adolescent children of women in college; college leaders/mentors; women in the ESL class (N=43).

Individual interviews with college graduates post-release from prison (N=20). Each interview was conducted at the Graduate Center, City University, and lasted anywhere from one to three hours. Women were compensated \$50 for participating in the interview.

Interviews with Correctional Administrators and Officers. In order to understand the impact of the college program on the prison environment, interviews with administrators and Correctional Officers would be essential. (N=5).

Focus group interviews and surveys of educators. In order to document the impact of the college program on educators and college communities, a focus group with college faculty (N=20) was conducted by the research team in 1999. A survey was distributed in the year 2000 to faculty of the Spring 2000 semester. Two group discussions were held with the Presidents of the Consortium universities (focus groups, N=20 faculty; 7 Presidents or designees; survey, N=20).

Quantitative recidivism study: tracking of women who attended college while in prison and a comparison group of women who did not attend college while in prison (N=274 women in the college program and a comparison group of 2031 women who did not attend college).

Cost/Benefit Analysis of the College Bound Program relying upon data from 2000-2001.

Footnote 2: The Race, Ethnicity, Class and Opportunity Gap project involves a multi-racial and ethnic Youth Leadership and Research Community to investigate how race, ethnicity, class and opportunity and outcomes are aligned in public schools, from the perspective of a broad range of youth. Finance equities and geographic segregation assure that most youths attend segregated and differentially financed schools (Darling-Hammond, ; Education Week, January 7, 2002; Mickelson, ; Oakes, ; Orfield, ; Stuart-Wells,). Wealthier and whiter students are more likely to attend schools with higher per capita expenditures, teachers with better credentials, who receive higher salaries and hold more rigorous expectations (Anyon, 1997; Ferguson, 1998). From integrated suburban and urban high schools, perhaps as painfully, we learn that race, ethnicity and social class, *even in the same school*, over-determine academic placement, opportunities and outcomes. The promise of integration has never been realized; the structural, systemic and institutional features of the “gap” need to be examined even –or maybe particularly –within those schools in which integration presumably thrives. It is our hope that suburban and urban communities beginning to confront questions of *why* the gap persists can more effectively pursue strategies for *how* to narrow the gap, once they understand causes, consequences and potential remedies from the perspective of youth. It is our sense, further, that youth deserve a public and scholarly forum for analyzing and organizing around the “gap.” Over two years, this Research Community will produce scholarship, reports for policy makers, brochures/newsletters/cultural products for community/popular education and materials for educators representing the range of views that youth hold about race/ethnic inequities in opportunities and outcomes.

These thirty-six students (who are working with support teachers in their home schools) were

trained over the course of the Spring and Summer 2002, and helped to design and interpret data from:

- *A survey* distributed across districts (N=3799 9th and 12th graders, stratified by geography, race, ethnicity and academic history).
- *An interview schedule* used with a sample of recent graduates from four districts, who were tracked into college, work, military, prison or home, depending on their circumstances.
- *A focus group format* used in four districts with distinct groups of students (students at the academic “top,” “middle” and “bottom” of their schools), gathering their views of race, ethnicity and opportunity in the country and in their schools.
- *An observational/interview protocol* for cross-visitation of each others’ schools.

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